

The Politics of Storytelling – A Review of *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*

Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is a graphic biography of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar published in 2011 by Navayana, a publishing house that focuses on the issue of caste from an anti-caste perspective. In this ground-breaking work, Pardhan-Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam interweave past events with current occurrences, infusing vibrant life into the graphic idiom through their awe-inspiring art. My attempt in this essay is to examine the artistic choices that went into the making of this graphic novel, and to weigh their political significance against the majority of the literature available to us in modern India.

I Summary:

Bhimayana unfolds in the context of a conversation at a bus stop, apparently between a Dalit woman and a caste Hindu man. The man complains about his dead-end job and blames his situation on job quotas for Backward and Scheduled Castes. This serves as a catalyst for the woman to begin narrating what is essentially the plot of the novel – various instances from the life of Ambedkar and their parallels in the modern scenario.

The novel is divided into four small chapters or ‘books’. Book 1, Water, highlights the pervasive presence of caste in Ambedkar’s daily life. A young Bhim could not drink from the same tap as his upper-caste classmates; furthermore, on a trip with his family, not a single person along the way gave him water for fear of being polluted. This would turn out to be the most unforgettable lesson about untouchability that he would learn. Throughout the chapter, we see excerpts from various modern news articles that show how untouchability is certainly not just a concern of the past. Book 2, Shelter, is premised around Ambedkar’s experiences in Baroda as an adult. He was driven out of a hotel run by a Parsi man for being a non-Parsi, and was further denied accommodation in his Hindu and Christian friends’ houses as well. These moments of transparency show us that untouchability was present even outside the Hindu social order. Book 3, Travel, takes place in Chalisgaon, Nasik where Ambedkar was looking into the social boycott by caste Hindus of the Untouchables in Dhulia. On the insistence of the people, Ambedkar agreed to stay the night with them, but the journey to their neighbourhood was a rather unsteady one. The tongawallas (vehicle drivers) refused to drive Ambedkar and so his tonga had to be driven by a complete novice, leading to an accident. This taught

Ambedkar that a Hindu tongawalla, menial in the eyes of caste Hindus, can look upon himself as superior to all Untouchables. It is at the end of this chapter that the initial conversation wraps up. The Hindu man admits to having a new-found respect for Ambedkar and sees why he is such an icon for Dalits today, despite still disagreeing with his ideology. Book 4, The Art of Bhimayana, introduces the artists and writers and gives us a sneak peek into the making of the graphic novel. We learn about the creative processes that went into the novel as well as the rationale behind them.

II Analysis:

Bhimayana is a political graphic novel published by Navayana, self-proclaimed as India's first and only publishing house to focus on the issue of caste from an anti-caste perspective.^[i] Named after Dr B.R. Ambedkar's socially and morally concerned interpretation of Buddhism, Navayana translates to 'new vehicle'.^[ii] In relation to this, there seems to be a certain significance of 'Bhimayana' as a title. A semantic analysis of the word indicates to an obvious reference to 'Ramayana'. In the words of Durgabai Vyam, the artist responsible for the novel "While doing the book I once told Anand (the publisher), this is like the Ramayana! He said, 'No, this is Bhimayana' – and that's how we hit upon this title."^[iii] Bhimayana translates to Bhim's journey, which is an accurate description of the plot within the novel, however, its deeper political significance exists in the parallels it draws with Ramayana. Reworked folk songs have acted as key tools for the Bahujan Samaj Party in spreading Ambedkar's ideology since the 1990s. For instance, in one song, Kaushalya Rani (the eldest wife of King Dashratha in Ramayana) is replaced by Ambedkar's mother.^[iv] Ram is a central figure in Hinduism and is revered as 'maryada purushottama' or the perfect man.^[v] Replacing his image in popular culture with that of Ambedkar's is a powerful subaltern move which essentially flips the Hindu social order on its head, with an Untouchable man as the ideal.

The graphic novel is a term first coined in English in 1964, thus being a very young form of artistic expression.^[vi] Pardhan-Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam added their own twist to the art form, by not confining their characters to boxes, creating 'space for all to breathe'. With customary tribal patronage dwindling over the past century, tribal art has become a dying medium, and in this context, the decision to employ tribal artists to illustrate the story of an Untouchable leader becomes all the more significant.

Several artistic choices throughout the novel are quite obviously politically charged. The speech bubbles that contain dialogue are of two types. One is in the shape of a bird, and it contains the dialogues of 'characters whose

speech is soft, the lovable characters, the victims of caste'. The second type takes the shape of a scorpion's tale, holding the dialogues of 'characters who love caste, whose words carry a sting and contain poison'. This polarisation of characters is a clear representation of the authors' perspective, which is unabashedly anti-caste. It depicts Ambedkar as the well-meaning protagonist and caste Hindus as the evil antagonists. A third bubble is that of the thought bubble, pictured to be stemming from the mind's eye to 'contain words that cannot be heard but can be perceived'. This appears to be a subtle reference to the Third eye in Buddhism, which is the inner eye or eye of wisdom.[\[vii\]](#) The artists incredibly infuse deep meaning into features that can be overlooked as simple aesthetic tools.

Bhimayana is generous with its symbolism. The ecology of Pardhan Gond art is such that even when dealing with urban subjects, we see freefalling animals, birds, and trees. A thirsty young Ambedkar is visualised as a fish and happiness is depicted not through smiling faces but a dancing peacock. The artists introduce poignancy into situations and characters through drawings where words would otherwise be lacking. The novel features the image of pointing fingers throughout the narrative. One may interpret the pointing fingers as being aimed in a discriminatory fashion towards the Untouchables. A more pronounced observation, however, may be supplemented by the fact that most statues of Ambedkar erected in his honour depict him pointing forward. This could be a metaphor for progress, a collective movement towards a better, equalitarian future. Another example of universal equality in the novel is shown in the drawing of people; each person irrespective of caste, class, or gender, is drawn in black and white with similar strokes and textures. It subtly encourages the readers to view every character as fundamentally alike. A more pervasive, though perhaps understated symbolic value is injected in the colour blue. It is featured prominently in the novel, whether as bright blue water, or a more muted blue in the clothes of Ambedkar. This bolsters the use of the popular Ambedkarite greeting 'neel salam' or blue salute, which embodies Ambedkarite ideals.[\[viii\]](#)

The writing in Bhimayana is lucid and accessible. The historic tale of Ambedkar is seamlessly interwoven with modern examples. The text borrows heavily from contemporary news articles, a tactic which triumphs in giving the reader a solid foundation in the reality of caste. The matter is structured to retain the interest of the reader, and when combined with the artwork, we are presented with a piece of literature that is unapologetically deliberate in its narrative.

Bhimayana is a departure from the norm that successfully punctures the mainstream narrative and aims spotlights at issues that escape widespread coverage. The novel is remarkable for the authors' immersion of the story within a folk-art tradition and their crafting of a politically-engaged account

that remains open to a diversity of audiences. If it is possible to draw from this book a child's description of good versus evil, this is because the simplest narratives are the most politically expedient.

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